> “We shall stick to own game rather than become preoccupied with the reputation of the opponents, the team is prepared for the challenge despite the physical demands of facing more experienced sides.” Coach Bikamba said.

The rugby women 7’s head coach Lucien Bikamba is backing a youthful squad to spring a surprise in Nairobi as the country returns to the continental women’s sevens stage after a lengthy absence.

The young women’s rugby team will have little time to ease into the Africa Women’s Sevens Championship after being drawn against defending champions South Africa in their opening match in Nairobi on Saturday.

Coach Bikamba is nevertheless confident his side can make an impression against some of the continent’s established teams, insisting that pace, fitness and a willingness to compete will be central to their campaign.

The 12-player squad, which left Rwanda on Wednesday, November 4, is heading to Kenya for the November 7–8 tournament after four weeks of preparation combining pitch sessions and gym work.

Bikamba said the selection favoured young players with the speed and physical conditioning needed for the demands of sevens rugby, where quick transitions, open space and relentless running can decide a match.

He believes the squad has the potential to grow into a competitive side, even if several players are still developing their understanding of the game.

The coach described the selection process as demanding, with competition for places keeping players on their toes throughout preparations.

He is particularly encouraged by the pace available out wide, where Uwimanimpaye Sylvie and Uwizeyimana Diane, both from 1000 Hills Rugby Club, expected to offer attacking options.

He also highlighted the potential of captain Umwiza Liliane and Uwizeyimana Diane, pointing to the emerging talent within the group.

Bikamba said the team had trained well and was ready for the challenge, although

preparations were not without limitations.

Most of the players are students, making it difficult to organise friendly matches before departure. The team therefore heads to Nairobi without the benefit of competitive warm-up games.

That leaves the opening fixtures as an important test of how quickly the young players can settle, build combinations and translate their training into performances on the pitch.

Rwanda will face a particularly demanding Pool A, which includes South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

South Africa arrives as defending champions, having beaten hosts Kenya 22-0 in last year's final. They also bring considerable experience from the international sevens circuit.

The coach acknowledges the strength of the opposition but believes Rwanda's relative lack of exposure could work in their favour.

The women' 7's team last competed in the continental 7's competition in Zimbabwe before the Covid-19 pandemic brought the tournament to a halt.

Their return means opponents have had limited recent opportunities to assess Rwanda's current playing style.

Bikamba hopes his players can use that uncertainty to their advantage.

"We shall stick to own game rather than become preoccupied with the reputation of the opponents, adding that the team had prepared for the challenge despite the physical demands of facing more experienced sides." Coach Bikamba said.

"We're not travelling for a tour," he said, underlining the team's intention to compete rather than simply gain experience.

The coach has set a target of finishing among the top 10 teams, but says the wider ambition goes beyond the immediate tournament.

Rwanda Rugby Federation's (RRF) longer-term plan is to build from the grassroots, strengthen the foundations of the both the women's and men's game and develop

players capable of competing with the region’s leading sides.

Bikamba hopes the current group will form the backbone of a stronger national team over the next five years.

The squad’s age profile reflects that approach. Players range from 17 to 21, giving the team a relatively young core with room to develop through regular competition.

Mwiza Lilian Team Captain

Captain Liliane said the players were prepared both mentally and physically for the challenge ahead.

She acknowledged that facing established top-tier sides would test the team, but described the opportunity as an important measure of how far the players have progressed.

Playing against stronger opposition, she said, would help the squad identify its weaknesses, build confidence and understand what is required to compete at a higher level.

For RRF, the tournament is about more than the results in Nairobi. It is also an opportunity to test a new generation of players against some of Africa’s best and begin laying the groundwork for the future.

Rwanda’s campaign opens against South Africa at 10:28am on Saturday, followed by Zambia at 12:50pm. They will complete their Pool A fixtures against Zimbabwe at 4:18pm.

The tournament also carries an international incentive, with a place in the World Rugby HSBC SVNS 3 competition available to the best-placed team outside South Africa, which already competes in a higher division.

For Bikamba’s young side, the immediate task is to make its mark in Nairobi. The longer-term challenge is to turn this opportunity into the foundation of a team capable of challenging Africa’s established rugby nations.